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A NOVEL FOR HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS: HAL BORLAND'S "WHEN THE LEGENDS DIE."

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Hal Borland's "When the Legends Die" is especially appropriate for high school seniors because its central problem--a Ute Indian boy's search for his identity and expected role in society--is exactly that faced by these students. The novel is divided into four sections, each concerned with a specific stage in the development of the protagonist. The theme of the novel is expressed through the boy's love for the "old ways" of his people, his meeting the corrupting ways of civilization in his career as a rodeo rider, and his final return to the purifying climate of the wilderness. Other points which should be considered in a discussion of the novel are the symbolism of the grizzly bear, the meaning of the title, and the theme's relevance to contemporary life.

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## A Novel for High School Seniors: Hal Borland's *When the Legends Die*

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SEARCHING for a contemporary American novel which will speak directly to your senior English students? Try Hal Borland's *When the Legends Die*. Last year, I found that this contemporary work<sup>1</sup> proved extremely teachable, both with my college-prep class and my regular classes, primarily because the central problem faced by the protagonist, a Ute Indian boy growing up in twentieth-century America, is exactly the problem faced by most high school seniors today. That problem is a young person's search for his own identity and expected role in society.

Because my students could easily identify with the protagonist, they were quite responsive to class discussion of this novel. I even encouraged them to draft a letter which we sent to Hal Borland, asking for his answers to some questions we had raised during our discussions. Somewhat to our surprise, he graciously responded. This rather personal connection with a living author

<sup>1</sup>Hal Borland, *When the Legends Die* (New York: Bantam Books), p. 106. All other page references are to this edition.

seemed to stimulate further my students' interest in the novel.

Since the students had reacted enthusiastically to *When the Legends Die*, I wanted other senior English teachers to know of this work. Thus, I prepared the following brief analysis, which often reflects the ideas and questions raised during my own classes' discussion. I take this informal means, then, to mention my indebtedness to all of my students for their direct and indirect contributions to the following.

Borland has divided his novel into four sections: "Bessie," "The School," "The Arena," and "The Mountains." Each section is concerned with a specific stage in the development of Tom Black, the Ute youth who is the protagonist.

In the first part, Tom lives with his parents, first on a reservation and then more significantly in the wilderness of Colorado as his ancestors had done. This fact is significant, because Tom is here in the first stage of his development: the purely primitive stage.

In the second part, Tom is taken to a reservation school (Ignacio), because his parents have died, leaving him to fend

for himself in the "old ways." At the school Tom is confronted by the "civilized" world. He is twelve years old, cannot speak English, and is constantly rebelling against the attempts to civilize him. After numerous futile attempts to find a trade skill which he could learn, Tom eventually accepts the outward signs of the "new ways" and discovers a sense of mastery in riding horses which have not yet been trained.

In "The Arena," Tom becomes the property of Red Dillon, an ex-rodeo performer. In this section Tom learns how to ride bucking horses as well as how to lose a bucking contest whenever Red tells him to. Tom soon breaks with Red and strikes out on his own as a competitive bronc rider. He succeeds, but is driven by a passionate hate of the "new ways," or the "white man's ways," which causes him to ride his broncs to submission. Of course, such tactics often disqualify Tom from the championship standings, but he has enough clean rides to win a living for himself. A series of bronc riding accidents finally culminates in a bad spill in Madison Square Garden which puts Tom in the hospital. This stage in Tom's development finds him participating fully in the "civilized" world.

Tom returns to Colorado in the fourth section to recuperate from his serious injury. He takes a job as a sheep herder, living in the mountains much as he and his parents had done earlier. During this period Tom searches for his identity by stalking his old Bear Brother (a Grizzly which had been his pet cub during his days alone in the wilderness). This represents the final, or adult, stage in Tom's development, when he finally recognizes his own identity.

Borland has obviously brought Tom full cycle during the course of the novel: from the wilderness ("Bessie"), through an initiation into the "civilized" world ("The School") and full participation in it ("The Arena"), to the wilderness again

("The Mountains"). While Tom as protagonist receives Borland's keenest attention during this cycle, several other characters are also rather fully developed.

THOSE characters receiving most attention include Red Dillon, Meo, and Blue Elk. Red Dillon is the ex-rodeo performer who takes Tom away from the reservation, introducing him to the world of small time rodeos. Red is corrupt, perhaps symbolizing Tom's first real introduction to the evil of the "civilized" world. At one time, Red had been a decent bronc rider, but his drinking habits have forced him to acquire money illegally. He lives in New Mexico with Meo, an old Mexican whom Red had used as his means of support before encountering Tom. As he had done earlier with Meo, Red teaches Tom how to lose a go-round intentionally so that the next time he rides, Red can bet large sums of money on him. Tom is then instructed to win this latter ride and Red collects his bets from the inhabitants of the small town where the rodeo is being held.

When Tom comes to live with Red, Meo is past his prime and has not ridden in a rodeo for a number of years. Meo stays on with Red, however, planting and harvesting the chili beans from which he makes the chili that sustains him and Red during the winter months. Meo is kind to Tom and tries to warn him about the evil ways of Red. He also teaches Tom many useful skills for successfully riding bucking horses. Tom helps Meo harvest the chili beans for the four or five years that he is associated with Red and during these harvest sessions, Meo reveals to him his theory that "Life is the boss. We do what we can. Then we are old. We creep off in a corner and sit, and the tongue makes the rumble. But it is only noise, talk, talk, talk" (p. 106). Meo's reference here to "the rumble" is in connection with the

chili bean which is eaten by men and makes a rumble in their stomachs. Meo continues by advising Tom that he too will be eaten, though he may cause a rumble in the stomach of those who consume him.

Although such philosophizing is at times incongruous with Meo's apparent illiteracy, Borland is generally successful in convincing his reader that Meo and Tom could engage in such conversation. Meo seems to represent the example of a "primitive" man who has been crushed by the "civilized" world. He provides living proof for Tom that he too will eventually succumb to the evils of the white man's society.

A third interesting character confronted by Tom is Blue Elk. He is a Ute Indian who has been seduced by the white man and has now turned against his own people. Actually, he will betray anyone, white or Indian, for money. Tom's association with Blue Elk is brief but is quite significant in that Blue Elk is the one who lures Tom to the reservation school after the death of Tom's parents. Blue Elk's interest in Tom is not, as one might suspect, totally honorable. In fact, he consents to bring Tom to the reservation only after being assured by the reservation official that he will receive a monetary reward.

**B**RIEFLY, the theme of *When the Legends Die* concerns Tom Black's successful search for his identity. Throughout the novel, Tom is gradually exposed to the "civilized" world of the white man which he is destined to become a part of. Tom continually compares the white man's ways with "the old ways" of the primitive Ute Indians, finding that the old ways are dying out. Although Tom realizes that he cannot practice the old ways of his people, he at first tries to do so by living alone in the wilderness because he senses that they are morally superior to the "new ways." Even after he has been taken to the

reservation school, Tom retains the desire to return to the old ways, the primitive ways of life.

After Red Dillon adopts Tom, a sense of belonging comes to Tom, and he begins to feel that perhaps he will be able to adjust to the white man's world by participating legitimately in it as a bronc rider. Red's shady tactics soon dispel Tom's hopes, however.

Eventually, Tom can no longer tolerate living with Red and tells him that he will ride in the next rodeo to win, rather than to set up a "windfall" for Red. This angers Red, but Tom knocks him down, thus emphasizing his determination to break with Red. That afternoon Tom cannot locate Red but he decides to ride in the rodeo anyway. A change comes over Tom as he slips into the saddle that afternoon. As Borland tells it,

For the first few jumps Tom didn't know whether he could make it or not. Then something happened inside. He wasn't riding a bronc. He was riding a hurt, a hate. He had walked away from Red Dillon this morning because, though he hated him, he didn't want to kill him. Now he wanted to hurt and maim. All his tiredness was gone. His timing came back, all his skill. He raked and gouged with his spurs. He fought every pitch and lunge, punished the horse every way he could. And the horse fought back (p.121).

Thus begins a pattern of life for Tom. He leaves Red after this episode and joins the national rodeo circuit, riding broncs in nearly every major city in the country. Tom believes that he is leading a meaningful life, but after a few years, the pattern begins to bother him. He exists only for the few minutes in the arena when he is able to punish, to maim, and sometimes even kill the horse he is riding. He becomes known among rodeo people as "Killer Tom Black."

After Tom suffers his most serious

rodeo accident in Madison Square Garden and returns to Colorado to recuperate, he has an opportunity to think about his life. While in the midst of such recollection, Tom's flock of sheep is attacked by a large Grizzly bear. Foolishly, Tom runs unarmed at the bear, who fortunately runs away. This encounter causes Tom to remember the bear cub which he had raised as a boy in the wilderness. In the fall after he has finished with his job as sheep herder, Tom returns to the mountains to hunt down and kill the bear.

The bear hunt is symbolic. As a result of this adventure, Tom discovers who he is. Recalling the primitive methods of hunting, Tom catches up with the bear, has him located in the sights of his rifle, but is unable to squeeze the trigger. Instead, Tom strips off all his clothing and swims in a cold mountain stream. After his swim, he climbs the mountain and lies naked in the sun, letting it beat against his back. This scene apparently represents a kind of baptism for Tom, as he cleanses himself of his hatreds. He returns to his wilderness camp and recalls his recent experiences while hunting the bear. Finally, he answers his own question of why he did not kill the bear as follows:

... he had done his killing, killed so many things, so many memories, that there was nothing left to kill except himself. Facing that and not knowing who he was, forgetting even his own identity, he didn't kill the bear. He went in search of himself (p. 214).

We now realize that Tom's swim and mountain climb have not only cleansed him of his hatreds, but have provided him with an explanation of his own identity. Tom realizes that he is no longer a clout Indian, an Indian trying

to live in the "old ways," but neither is he a typical reservation Indian. Tom decides to remain in the wilderness for a few more days to recapture the memories of the past, the memories of "the old ways," in hopes that he may never again be induced to forget them when he returns to the "civilized" world. He has, then, gained a sincere appreciation of his primitive heritage.

As the opening for his novel, Borland has included the following lines:

When the legends die, the dreams end.  
When the dreams end, there is no more greatness.

These lines became especially significant to my students after they finished reading the novel. They decided that Tom's legends had nearly died when he was caught in the rodeo pattern of life, but that when he recovered the memory of these legends during his bear hunt, he discovered who he was which may permit him to achieve real greatness.

I think that high school students are able to identify with Tom Black readily, because they can recognize in Tom's rebellion against the authority of others, e.g., the reservation official and Red Dillon, their own rebellion against the authority of parents and school teachers. Further, students can see how Tom's attempt to kill the "old ways" proved unsuccessful, that he was able to discover his identity only after he accepted the value of retaining the memory of the "old ways." Similarly, today's high school students can see that their respect for "old ways," or the ways of adults, is essential if they are to meaningfully discover their own appropriate roles in society. They realize that "When the legends die, the dreams end. When the dreams end, there is no more greatness."